

HOW YOU FUNCTION AS AN ARTIST BETWEEN TWO POLES

Sophie Williamson, 2020
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It's been a long time since we've seen each other. You normally spend your summer in the UK don't you, I guess that hasn't been possible this year?

Yes, I always spend my summer in the UK, at least for a few weeks. My parents have an apartment in Lyme Regis, I grew up with that apartment as our holiday place and I still go there with my family. It feels really strange that we can't go this year.

That area is also known as the Jurassic Coast and has an abundance of fossils. I've always felt that there's something inherently geological or archaeological about your process of working, the way that you uncover narratives between objects or materials that are normally silent or invisible to one another.

I think from early on in my work I was always interested in combining objects from different kinds of worlds, maybe also from different time periods. For the Gwangju Biennial in 2006 I used one large ammonite that my mum found, and another very round stone. And I also made casts of some of them. The first time I participated in the São Paulo Biennial, in 2004, I made ceramic flutes from ammonites, which had a little bit to do with activating these ancient things or bringing something alive that has a presence from another world. They would reappear in other works and exhibitions, which would allow them to evolve over time. For instance, these stones and fossils were first exhibited in an installation, but then I got interested in the possible sound of them, or maybe the voice of them, that's why I started casting them and making flutes. These ceramic ammonite flutes were part of my exhibition at the São Paulo Biennial: I was particularly interested in Levi-Strauss' *The Tristes Tropiques* (1955), where he is studying indigenous tribal communities in Brazil. He describes many things, like the landscape, but one of the things that he observes the most is the way that the indigenous communities communicate with the spirits or their surroundings. A lot of their day is spent not working for basic needs, but animating their surroundings, for instance making feather works and flutes. And maybe that's also a language, a way of communicating with the animated world.

You often make works that respond to your position in the world. What have you been making this summer?

I've been making two tulip petal collage works for the Stedelijk Museum. For me works are always a kind of a proposition, a way to think about the position that you have as the artist, and how to respond to world events, for example the US elections or our relation to nature. The new works came from an earlier commission that I did for the Amsterdam Central Station (2017), for the newly opened North South metro line, for which the brief was to connect the Netherlands with the world. So, I was thinking if you would zoom in to Amsterdam or the Netherlands from above you would mostly see all the tulip fields, and that's an image which a lot of people have in their minds when they think about the Netherlands. I wanted to link this Dutch tulip to an image from somewhere else in the world and combined it with ceremonial Indonesian textiles that I came across through research. These woven textiles called palepai and tampan are from the south of Sumatra and they often have as their motif a large ship, with humans, plants and animals making this crossing to the afterlife. The mast of the ship is often also a tree of life. I really like this metaphor, combined with the emblem of the tulip petal and this transitional moment that these textiles describe.

This image of the tree of life on a moving ship is an interesting dichotomy: the tree with its deep roots is about being grounded, but yet it's placed on a transitional space. How is this duality important for the work?

These textiles are a way for me to look at other topics as well, such as Dutch colonialism, diasporas and migration. The Indonesian weavings had multiple meanings and purposes. One motif that you often see is water as the mirror. In Eastern philosophy opposites balance one another. Black and white; ying and yang; good and evil; the upper world and under world. They belong together. And this is also present in the vessel. In Taoism the vessel – the ship but also the ceramic vessel – is seen as a container. The empty space inside is as important as the outer space. A lot of Taoist poetry is about those two elements.

This reminds me of Ursula Le Guin's 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' text, where she disputes the idea of the club as the earliest human tool. Instead she proposes that the first tool was actually the receptacle or the vessel, to collect berries and nuts for later, planning for the future. She translates this idea to fiction writing as way of collecting cultural ideas together. Do you think that this could translate to your work?

Definitely. For instance, in one of the original tampan motifs on which I based a tulip collage, shows a vessel with another vessel upside-down on top of each other, and those together make a womb space. There are also forms in these tampan that can be read as ovaries and fallopian tubes. So, the first 'carrier bag' could be seen as the womb. The

womb is a vessel amalgamating the male and female, from which new life sprouts. These textiles were used in burial ceremonies and marriages and birth rites. The womb motif is also a way of thinking about existence: from the particle level and the vast universe. We could think of the cosmos as another kind of womb, or carrier bag, with a different scale.

I find that a very kind of intriguing way of thinking about an individual object or idea too. For example, I spent quite a lot of time in Brazil where I made a work, *The Land of Toverknaal* (2002), which was about Candomblé. Candomblé is a kind of idiosyncratic religion which travelled with enslaved people to Brazil. They were of course not allowed to use their own religions, so therefore they mimicked elements of Catholicism whilst mixing it with their own belief systems. It has a very complex pantheon of layers of gods. Through an initiation process, you find out which of the deities – or Orixas – fit you best. Each Orixia is associated with specific colours, animals, and minerals, and the rituals incorporate a lot of different objects, such as shells, flowers and food, each with different meanings. So, this religion is like a vessel, carrying and mixing many different ideas.

Can you tell me about the relationship between the Netherlands and Indonesia in your work?

Well firstly, Indonesia was a Dutch colony and then secondly my father is from Indonesia. My grandparents migrated to the Netherlands from Indonesia after the Second World War, via a vessel: a ship. My mother is half English and half Dutch, and her father was a tulip bulb grower and exporter. So that's the two personal connections in the work, as well as the colonial and trade ones linking the two countries. The personal and the political are so interlinked. For me, these collages are also a way to talk about my family history.

There are so many connections made through your family's story to historical narratives of the country, slavery, trade and capital, but these must chime with so many other people's family histories too.

Exactly, yes. One of the collages that I made for the Stedelijk, is linked to this year's commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the ending of the occupation of Japan during the Second World War of Indonesia. That historic moment was also the moment where my family was freed from the Japanese, because my grandfather was imprisoned in a Japanese camp and my grandmother was left with her two children while Japanese soldiers camped out in their backyard. This event also propelled their decision to migrate to the Netherlands, in the late 1950s, because a lot of Chinese Indonesians worked for the Dutch government and they were prosecuted when Indonesia wanted to become more independent. The work also links to the slave trade that was going on in the Indies. The slavery under the Dutch empire was huge but isn't known so much, because rather than bringing people from Africa, the

Dutch mostly brought people from the surrounding countries, across South-East Asia, to Indonesia to work on plantations and trading posts. These narratives mirror many other families' stories too, of course.

The tulip petals in these ones are very beautiful, they look almost marbled.

The different varieties of tulips are really important to the work. I work with the Hortus Bulborum in Limmen which functions as a gene bank for tulips and other bulb varieties. One of the varieties that I always try to work with is the Rembrandt tulip, which has this beautiful flamed pattern. They were extremely sought after during Tulipmania (1635-1637) because no one knew how to make them. A few of these bulbs were worth the equivalent of a canal house. Finally, it turned out that it's a virus that causes these flamed patterns in the petals, but this was before people knew what a virus was. The cultivation of the tulips and the whole industry behind it is fascinating and says a lot about the Dutch mentality of entrepreneurship.

*The colours of the tulips and other aspects of the works are always significant to the work, aren't they? I just recently read *Bluets* by Maggie Nelson, which I know is a book that has been influential for you.*

It's so interesting the emotive power that colour has over us. With the knitted floor pieces, which included a reading list with books, much of which had a relationship to colour, the idea was to create these spaces that you can use for contemplation or maybe for healing, lying down surrounded with these colours and with a person reading from these books, which were selected around personal, spiritual, physical or political forms of resistance.

There's uncertain processes and chemistry's at play in your work, which you can direct but never know for certain how they will turn out: natural dying, tulip petals, ceramics and glazes.

That's exactly why I'm attracted to working with those elements. With glazing ceramics, for instance, any little traces of iron in the clay changes the glaze and creates beautiful imperfections that you can't predict. The tulip petal collages are also a way for me to work with natural elements in a temporal sense. Since I have to work with the tulip season, I can only make one or two a year, which is an entirely different rhythm of working compared to the cycle of exhibitions and biennials.

Last time I was on the Jurassic Coast, I was finding lots of these wonderful rocks Calcite which have crystal formations inside. You often use crystalline forms, especially in the rug works. Why are you drawn to this form?

With the ceramic vessels I have been interested in the relationship between the positive and negative space. The crystalline form holds both a positive and negative space, but it is also a shape that can tessellate

infinitely. I think it's particularly interesting to think of the exhibition space as a kind of an infinite space, where the crystal or the crystal motif is like an endless motif to expand the space. That's why I chose the crystalline motive for the floor works. Additionally, the crystal can be seen as being between a solid and a liquid form. Crystals grow in a pattern that can continue infinitely. The rug works enable me to create a space within a space. For instance, when you're doing yoga, you're operating within the rectangular shape of the yoga mat, all of your movements are within that space. I was interested in creating a different type of space for the body to be on, which would evoke another plane, like a three-dimensional or four-dimensional space. These knitted rugs are two-dimensional, but include lines in their patterns that could extend to an optical third-dimension. The floor pieces are often related to the human size – like the ones that I made for Camden Art Centre, where the audience could recline on them.

Much of the work is about connecting things which are otherwise invisibly linked. Is there a sense underlying your work that we're inherently connected and intertwined to everything, to nature, the elements, chemistry and matter, but also one-another?

I do think that is there in how I work. I'm very much pulled between two main elements: world events and personal narratives, and how as an artist you function between the two. *The Pattern of Change* (2017) is based on a Tao magic drawing or talismans dated to the 4th or 3rd century BC, which were used to meditate on in order to command the universe. Creating contemplative spaces within my exhibitions, I think, instigates an awareness of all those elements that you're mentioning. In the Tao pattern of change, it's all about meditating on the elements and to evoke harmonising influences, for example rain for the crops to grow. I call this practical magic. Based on these patterns of change drawings, I made ceramic snake-like forms that can be laid out in different ways on the floor, but they are also used to perform with and respond to through movement, like I did in DRIFT, the performance earlier this year in the Stedelijk. And, these forms could continue into an infinite space, continuously be added to and spread out indefinitely. The work continues to grow each time I show it. There's this kind of idea of lingering shapes, relating to the pattern of change or Chinese Taoism, a style of life in harmony with the universe that relates to invisible streams: bloodstreams, river flows, cloud movement, light and sonic waves, and the like. In Western art at the turn of the twentieth century, artists like Kandinsky and Af Klint were also using these swirly lines you see in Tao drawings or calligraphy. They were interested in the spiritual in abstraction, my work is also influenced by them. So, these shapes sit somewhere between science and the spiritual.

The swirly line shapes look like they come from a very different place, aesthetically and conceptually, from the geometric shapes in the collages and the floor works - but, actually, they're very similar to each other, aren't they?

Yes, people often think that it's strange how the visual languages I use are so different from each other, from geometric to natural and esoteric to free form. It might not be immediately clear to the eye, but everything fundamentally relates to one another.

Sophie Williamson is curator at Camden Art Centre, London, UK.